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Commission on the Status of Women
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Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the special session of the General Assembly entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century": implementation of strategic objectives and action in the critical areas of concern and further actions and initiatives: (i) participation in and access of women to the media, and information and communication technologies and their impact on and use as an instrument for the advancement and empowerment of women

Statement submitted by the Women's National Commission, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31 of 25 July 1996.

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The Women's National Commission is the United Kingdom's independent advisory body to government on women. It has over 230 partner organizations — women's non-governmental organizations (NGOs), trades unions, political parties, religious groups and women's sections of other NGOs — representing several million women throughout the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. The Women's Nations Commission also includes and works with other women's international organizations worldwide.

1. Technologies to create, process and disseminate information and therefore knowledge and power have been with us since the beginning of human time but access to information and subsequent empowerment has always been unequally shared and that inequality usually has a gender dimension.

2. The three global women's conferences — Nairobi, 1985; Beijing, 1995; New York, 2000 — all addressed the issues related to women and the media. With new

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media and other forms of communication technologies now coming to the fore, the General Assembly has called for a World Summit on the Information Society to meet at Geneva in December 2003. The discussions and outcomes of this session of the Commission on the Status of Women will therefore be a contribution to the World Summit. The expert group meetings, the Know How 2002 Conference and the NGO round table 2002 have not only outlined the problems still experienced by women in this field but have also described positive and exciting developments for women since 2000, particularly in Africa.

3. It is therefore essential that we ensure that our deliberations and agreed statements are mainstreamed into every aspect of the World Summit and not tacked on to the main debate and the final document as an afterthought. To do this, those of us representing civil society must return to our nation states and our regions and make sure that at every level what we have agreed at the Commission on the Status of Women is discussed and recognized, while at the United Nations level, the Division for the Advancement of Women carries out its mainstreaming function of the gender dimension into the work of the World Summit.

4. Despite considerable progress in recent years, access to information and communication technologies, notably the telephone, the mobile phone, the Internet and broadcast networks, remains unequally distributed. There are, for example, more televisions in Brazil, more fixed-line telephones in Italy, more mobile phones in the Republic of Korea and greater connectivity in Luxembourg than in the whole of Africa. Yet the population of Africa and the needs of its people greatly exceeds those of these other countries. These disparities are known as the "digital divide". It is important that we are aware of how this divide differentially affects women and that where we have success stories these are evaluated and analysed and good practice is spread.

5. Positive aspects of the information and communication technologies for women:

- These technologies are central to the creation of the merging global knowledge-based economy and can play an important role in accelerating growth, in promoting sustainable development and eradicating poverty in developing countries as well as countries in transition and facilitating their effective integration into the global economy.
- They offer vast opportunities for women's empowerment and the promotion of gender equality.
- Women's economic livelihoods can be expanded through increased access to local and international markets for women producers and traders and through increased access to jobs, education and training and entrepreneurial opportunities.
- Increased flexibility in employment conditions.
- Increased access to health, nutrition, education and other human development opportunities such as political participation.
- Through networking, women have made extensive use of ICT as an effective tool for the promotion of gender equality for empowerment.

- Access to advice services in, for example, situations of violence and sharing of information.

6. Negative aspects:

- The intersection of gendered social relationships, gender discrimination and gender-blind ICT policy processes undermine women's access to opportunities in the merging knowledge and information society and also diminish the potential of ICT to be an effective tool for the promotion of gender equality.
- Women's poverty, lack of access and opportunities, illiteracy, including computer illiteracy and language barriers, prevent the use of many aspects of the media.
- Negative images of women and children and stereotyped portrayals continue to exist. Pornography is a serious issue.
- Although more women are now employed in the media and have started to move into senior positions, men still dominate, particularly in the print and broadcast media and earn more and have greater influence on content than women.

7. The situation in the United Kingdom:

- In the United Kingdom, women are working in the media in increasingly large numbers, and in recent years women have moved into senior positions in newspapers, magazines and broadcasting. However, men still dominate and women tend to earn less than men of the same age.
- In the new technologies, a recent survey showed that 52 per cent of men surveyed used the Internet compared to 39 per cent of women. There are, however, significant differences between groups of women. Social class plays a huge role, as does age. However, things are changing for the better as a recent poll shows that almost equal numbers of boys and girls between the ages of 7 and 16 are Internet users.
- The United Kingdom Government has introduced a multiplicity of initiatives to increase the number of women using the new technology, which appear to be successful.
- Good Practice: Governments are under increasing pressure to experiment with the new technologies to enhance democratic participation. Recently, the United Kingdom All Party Parliamentary Group on Domestic Violence in conjunction with the Hansard Society and Women's Aid initiated "Womenspeak". It was an innovative, online, interactive project in which survivors of domestic violence were able to speak to each other and Members of Parliament. The object was to reach out to those least likely to engage in the democratic process. For most of these women, it would have been almost impossible for them to participate in other more traditional methods of democratic involvement. The project resulted in changes in government policy and legislation.

8. For action at the Commission on the Status of Women, 2003:

- An exchange of views on obstacles to progress and examples of good practice for the empowerment of women in the Information Society of the 21st century.
- The mainstreaming of our deliberations into the World Summit on the Information Society Geneva 2003.